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Marketing Visitor Attractions in the Digital Age: A Study of the E-marketing Adoption in the Visitor Attraction Sector

Abstract

With the emergence and diffusion of the Internet and its rich digital array, tourism marketing has been drastically transformed by the advances in Information and Communication Technology (ICT). This is particularly relevant in a context of Visitor Attractions (VAs), a sector which appears to lag behind in terms of embracing the multi-faceted spectrum of digital marketing tools, particularly in medium and small-sized organisations. With this in mind, the supply-side viewpoint of the VA sector is poorly understood, with scarce empirical evidence relating to digital marketing practices. The proposed study offers an overarching model to empirically investigate E-marketing adoption in the VA sector. The main aim of the research is to systematically examine the complexity and extent of E-marketing forms and the causal relationship of the factors affecting the adoption of E-marketing and the continued adoption of E-marketing in the VA sector.

Keywords: Tourism E-marketing • Visitor attractions • E-marketing adoption • Continued Adoption • Scotland

1 Problem Definition

E-marketing has been identified as an essential activity for organisations globally as it presents the opportunity to increase market exposure, reach prospective customers and, ultimately, gain competitive advantage in a context of increasingly challenging market conditions. There are several benefits organisations can benefit from E-marketing, including; increased sales, improved value and enhanced communication capacity to users, costs saving and extended reach of the brand (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Mayer, & Johnston, 2009). Several studies have investigated the concept and the role of E-marketing (Brodie, Winklehofer, Coviello, & Johnston, 2007; Chuang, 2018; El-Gohary, 2012; Gilmore, Gallagher, & Henry, 2007; Sheikh, Shahzad, & Ishak, 2016). It has been stated that only firms employing E-marketing have the potential to change their business model (Coviello, Milley, & Marcolin, 2001; Krishnamurthy, 2006). E-marketing is defined here as “...the use of information technology for the marketing activity, and the processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and- society at large.” (Strauss & Frost, 2016, p. 23). It is recognised evidence that E-marketing has experienced an increasing application compared to fewer use of traditional marketing methods by organisations, denoting that E-marketing “... can be seen as an established practice in most companies and no longer a novelty.” (Barreto, 2016, p. 198). Numerous studies have examined the antecedents and consequences of ICT implementation (for instance, in manufacturing) although limited research has been undertaken to directly examine the forms of and the reasons for ICT implementation in the service industry, especially by tourism-related businesses (Wöber and Gretzel 2000, in Yuan et al. 2003). Although a well-established theoretical literature on new technology adoption and diffusion exists, it has been recognised that empirical evidence at organisational level on ICT adoption is limited (Duffy 2010). In particular, secondary research has showed this is expressly the case regarding the Visitor Attraction (VA) sector.

Visitor attractions (VAs) are a vital component of any country's tourism and entertainment industry as they can function as a stimulus to travel to destinations. A VA is defined as:

“a permanently established excursion destination, a primary purpose of which is to allow public access for entertainment, interest, and education; rather than being primarily a retail outlet, or a venue for sporting, theatrical or film performances. It must be open to the public, without prior booking, for published periods each year, and should be capable of attracting day visitors or tourists as well as local residents.” (VisitScotland, 2004, p. 8)

2 Literature Review

The review of the literature in this area has revealed the complications related to the concept E-marketing due to the lack of a common terminology; a fragmentation in the demarcation of the E-marketing definition and purpose in the extant body of both applied and academic literature, impeding a unified view and accepted definition in order to compare E-marketing with traditional marketing (Chaffey & Smith, 2013; El-Gohary, 2010a). This has led to the need for developing a current E-marketing conceptualisation and classification of the tools E-marketing entails, in particular with reference to VA marketing. As identified through the relevant literature, technologies employed in E-marketing can be clustered in the following six groups: Web marketing; Mobile marketing; Social media marketing; E-customer relationship management (E-CRM) marketing (includes E-mail, E-loyalty programmes and Intelligent CRM solutions); Intranet marketing; and Extranet marketing.

Although there is a significant interest in E-marketing, very little notable research specific on the adoption process with related technology adoption theories has been formed. Furthermore, despite the popularity of E-marketing and the potential for VAs to support marketing activities to create competitive advantage, research into VAs E-marketing is limited and focuses largely on the consumer in a B2C domain, neglecting other dimensions such as B2B and B2G. To date, there is paucity of systematic research on how E-marketing is used and adopted by VA organisations. Apart from individual case studies of specific ICTs employed for the marketing of individual VAs, or specific VA categories (e.g. museums in, Katsoni, 2014) or marketing tools (e.g. social media in, Belenioti and Vassiliadis, 2018), it has been identified by the author that an inadequate amount of research has been conducted in academia on the subject of E-marketing in the VAs sector when compared to other components of the tourism industry such as accommodation and transport. Low levels of E-marketing activity among VA operators have also been suggested (Benckendorff et al., 2014). This evidence constitutes the need to conduct in-depth studies to examine the potential causes affecting E-marketing behaviour to explain adoption (or non-adoption) decisions. Therefore, due to the relevance of the matter for the industry, a comprehensive approach for investigating E-marketing adoption, its antecedents and potential for the sector is considered necessary.

A multitude of studies and factors have been used to evaluate and assess the relationships and the effects of adopting technology on businesses and organisations (Dahnil, Marzuki, Langgat, & Fabeil, 2014). Many theories that deal with technology adoption are not specific to E-marketing adoption, yet they are relevant to E-marketing due to their contextual contribution to technological adoption. As E-marketing makes use of these same technologies of E-business and E-commerce in many ways, as a logical extension to achieve the traditional market practices of creating, communicating and delivering value to customers (Gilmore et al., 2007), the literature search was also extended to some related domains in order to investigate the different methodologies and factors applied in the E-Marketing literature and, more specifically, in connection with the VA context. Although being recognised as a vital activity for the success and longevity of VA operators, marketing represents a neglected topic in VA research (Leask, 2016). By combining the relevance of E-

marketing with the lack of research in the area of VAs, this research aims to fill an important gap in both practitioners' and academics' realms.

Based on the empirical evidence combined with relevant analyses recently conducted (Chatzoglou & Chatzoudes, 2016; Hatta et al., 2015), this study hypothesises the main factors believed to influence E-marketing adoption in VAs. Therefore, the factors identified can have either a positive or negative influence on the technology adoption process, representing either drivers or barriers depending on their value to the organisation (Gilmore et al. 2007). These factors are structured according to the Technology-Organisation-Environment framework (TOE; DePietro, Wiarda and Fleischer, 1990) and strengthened by the concurring theories of Diffusion of Innovation (DOI; Rogers, 1995) and Institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Drawing on the above mentioned organisational-focused theories, the factors identified in the literature are therefore divided into three contexts, namely: 1) technological; 2) organisational; and 3) environmental.

3 Conceptual Development

The formulation of the research questions build upon the gap in the literature identified by the author. Thus the following research questions are articulated:

1. *What is the current state of E-marketing in the VA sector?*

1.1. *What is the level of adoption (forms and level) of E-marketing in the VA sector?*

2. *What are the factors affecting the adoption extent and continued adoption of E-marketing in the VA sector?*

2.2. *What are the causal relationships between the factors identified and the adoption and continued adoption of E-Marketing in the VA sector?*

The shortage of research into the overarching adoption of E-marketing in VAs provided the impetus for this research study which addresses the gap revealed and contributes to the academic literature in the following ways. Firstly, it explores the state of the sector in regards to E-marketing. Secondly, the study provides insights into the level of use and how the VAs employ E-marketing. Thirdly, the study identifies and examines the factors affecting VAs adoption (and non-adoption) of E-marketing through the development and test of a theoretical framework. Fourth, it further examines the influence of factors to determine differences across VAs, for instance among the different product categories, areas and organisational groups. Specifically, E-marketing adoption will be investigated through the validation of hypotheses constructed upon twelve antecedents of adoption (independent variables) organised in three areas (technological, environmental and organisational), and two measures of adoption (dependent variables), namely:

- E-marketing extent, intended as the depth and breadth of E-marketing application by an organisation (Lin, 2014; Hsu et al., 2006);
- E-marketing continued adoption, measured by the degree of intention to switch over to the E-marketing or increase its use in the future (Liao and Lu, 2008).

A theoretical framework is proposed in order to facilitate the understanding, as shown in Figure 1 below.

4 Proposed Methodology

The majority of the studies identified on E-marketing adoption are characterised by the employment of quantitative methods (see, e.g., AlSharji et al., 2018; Eid & El-Gohary, 2013; Teo & Pian, 2003), therefore, neglecting aspects such as the construction of views and validation of findings through triangulation (Siamagka et al. 2015; Picoto, Bélanger, and Palma-Dos-Reis 2014). With reference to the VA sector in particular, several researchers have called for more empirical work, opposed

to descriptive and case studies (Leask, 2016) and the triangulation of qualitative and quantitative methods as research method to enable moving beyond the definition of aspects (Richards and Munsters 2010). Applying a post-positivism perspective, a quantitative dominant, mixed-methodological approach is anticipated for the study. Sequential exploratory design is utilised to complement qualitative views with statistically relevant data elicited from VA E-marketing informants. The unit of study is the Scottish VA sector, a diverse, rich setting which represents a suitable background for the implementation of the research. In the first stage, exploratory qualitative research is conducted via semi-structured interviews aimed at a selection of key-informants (n=13). This is followed by a quantitative phase aimed to reach the wide majority of the VA population in Scotland (n= 860; approx. 80% of total VAs) by means of a structured web-based questionnaire to measure the variables of the study, i.e. the dependent, independent and control variables. The combined work undertaken based on the review of technological adoption and VA marketing literature, complemented by the qualitative phase of interviews, identified a total of 12 factors as potential determinants of E-marketing adoption. Subsequently, Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) is operationalised through the data collected among Scottish VAs in the second research phase to perform the data analysis.

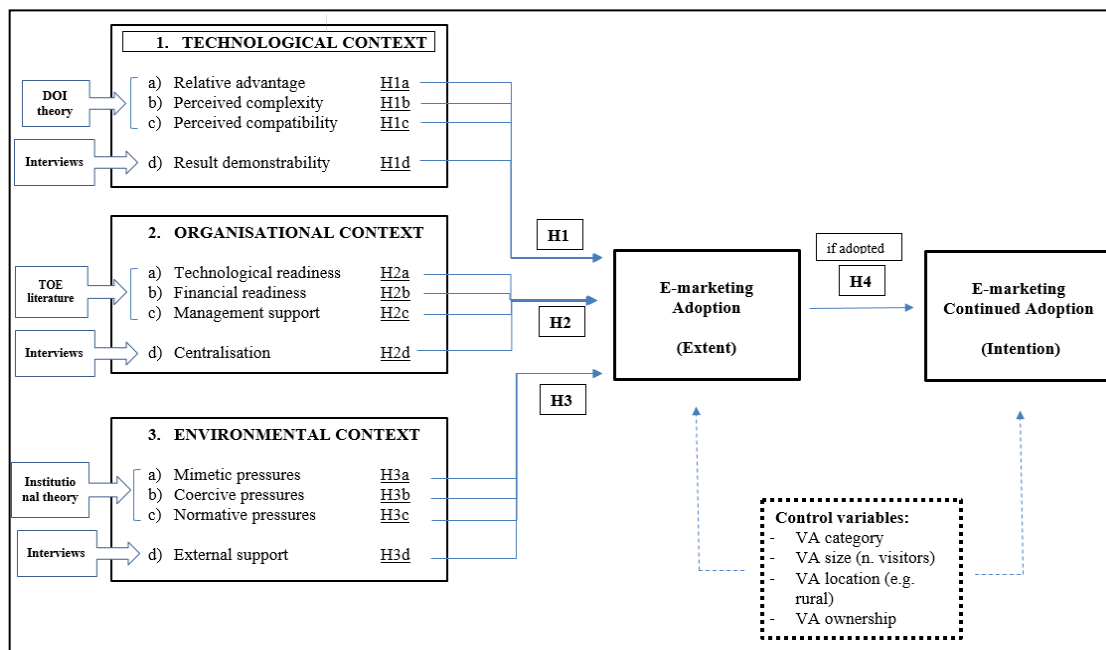


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of the study

5 Expected results

In response to the call of scholars for more research to investigate the potential influence of institutional pressures moderators (Heugens and Lander, 2009, in Liu et al. (2010), and combining this with the lack of application of Institutional theory in tourism research, this study aims at both theoretical and practical contributions. Therefore, Institutional theory in tourism emerges as a potential and novel tool to explain technology adoption and use among VAs. Furthermore, by reviewing the literature it is noticed that there are a limited number of studies that have implemented TOE, DOI and the Institutional theory in the field of E-Marketing, in particular with reference to the tourism context and VAs. Therefore, this research suggests an original approach by combining the three theories to provide a comprehensive framework to study the adoption of E-marketing in VAs. Practical implications are

also anticipated. One of objectives is developing a clear picture of the context VAs are facing in Scotland by determining the effects of several factors affecting E-marketing current and continued adoption. The study is expected to support both local tourism businesses, by offering practical guidance, and the wider Scottish tourism industry, with the potential of informing policies to facilitate the adoption and exchange of E-marketing practices in the VA sector.

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